

# Ex gratia



Andreas Gripp

*Ex gratia*

### Poetry books by the author

Gullible Skeptic (2001)  
Captain Fascist and the Plastic Storm Troopers (2002)  
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Like Darwin Among the Gods (2005)  
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The Fall (2010)  
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### Poetry chapbooks by the author

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Dr. Lerner's Study Notes (2009)  
In the Breath of Woven Seasons (Haiku) (2010)  
Metronome (2010)  
Under the Evergreens (2011)  
Ex gratia (2011)

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Author email & website: andreasgripp@hotmail.com  
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## Poems

The Competitor	1
Adagio	2
Bread	4
Norwegian Wood	5
Ex gratia	6
Haiku I	8
Haiku II	9
The Comforting, or the attempt at such	10
River Running	12
That Special Place Beneath the Water	14
Herbs	16
We Walked in Autumn	17
The Gleaning	18
Haiku III	19
The Confession	20
The Sound of Something Blooming	22
Haiku IV	23
The World Revolved and We Felt It Not	24

**(Note:** Because this chapbook tells a single story, the poems herein are intended to be read in sequence)

Houses are not haunted. *We* are haunted,  
and regardless of the architecture with which we  
surround ourselves, our ghosts stay with us  
until we ourselves are ghosts.

-- Dean Koontz

## **The Competitor**

You cannot love me  
as you do him,  
his breath taken  
from the earth  
three circlings-around-the-sun  
ago,  
in the jolt that an accident  
brings,

and in his shadow,  
if he had one,  
I'd be shrouded,

never sought for  
by your sight,

as if a ghost could be  
both dark and light.



## Adagio

The violin's colour  
has faded, like a novel  
in a bookshop window  
that's faced the sun  
for several weeks.

It was a brownish-  
red I'd say,  
*maroon* you'd call it,  
a double entendre no doubt,  
its body begotten  
of trees,  
its nylon voice a language  
transcending all  
that tongues have spoken.

You haven't even touched it  
in the three years  
since he died, the one  
you were to marry.  
But I sense you'll clasp it  
a final time,  
perhaps after gentle prodding,

to play the melody  
you once envisioned,  
not saying whom it is for,  
though I really needn't ask,

feign surprise  
at its denouement:

a long and wailing coda,  
a flinging-into-wall,  
the splintered wood  
and silence  
entreating no applause.

## Bread

In the park,  
one of the pigeons  
stands by the wayside,  
watching the others  
devour the bread  
you've shred and tossed  
about our feet.

*She's in grief*, you say to me  
with conviction,  
recalling my scolding  
from an hour ago  
(for your leaving your lunch uneaten).

You add that her mate was likely killed  
by a lunging cat,  
or maybe its wing was fractured  
and it took days to die,  
unable to fathom  
why the sky  
suddenly seemed so far away,  
indifferent  
to its laboured hops,  
its failure to seize  
what was cast:

seeds of melon, sunflower,  
bits of broken crust.

## Norwegian Wood

Today you never left  
your apartment,  
playing both sides of *Rubber Soul*  
repeatedly – flipping the record  
over and over for hours –

and no, it's not *The Beatles'* record  
you said, it's *his* record,  
his *favourite* record,  
it's *no one else's*, don't ever say  
otherwise again.

## Ex gratia

The seeds  
you left for the birds,  
by his grave  
(your betrothed's),  
are still untouched  
with our leaving,  
in your throes  
of "letting go."

We stood there  
a good two hours,  
your fingers following  
the furrows  
of his etched-in-granite  
appellation,

your spirit rapt  
by the melody  
coming from trees,  
and by the reverie  
of your blissful days with  
him.

*They'll eat them  
when I'm gone, you said,*  
a reference to our departing  
(or so I thought),  
with the cemetery gates  
about to close.

*I don't mean at dusk,*  
you uttered as addendum,  
during our trudge  
back to the car,  
*I mean when I lay beneath,*  
  
*beside him.*

## Haiku I

Sudden fall of rain  
Drumming of drops on the roof  
A sparrow's song stilled

## Haiku II

Respite from the rain  
Ray of sun on windowpane  
Brevity of light



**The Comforting,  
or the attempt at such**

On your couch,  
hearing the din  
of the summer storm,  
my hand makes a move to yours  
during the scores of overlapping  
rumbles,

and it flinches, yours does,

not from the sound  
of the thunder,  
but by the sight of four  
of my fingers  
subtly stretching, contending  
for your contact,

and your reflex is speedier  
than the lightning strikes  
outside,

your words just as burning,

*I can't, I'm sorry,  
I won't,*

*his hands only ...*

my sullen response  
gratefully masked  
by the uproar that tempests  
bestow:

*He's dead, Michelle,*

*he's dead*

## River Running

I have never seen you run  
but today is different –  
on the path, by the river,  
you run at an Olympic sprinter's  
pace,

and yes, the dash is short,  
and yes, I cannot keep up,  
and when at last I find you  
on a bench, panting,  
you talk of seeing him,  
in the purple shirt  
he used to wear,

and I think it's one of those  
mistaken identity moments:  
a young man, in his 20s,  
sporting what your beloved  
once had worn,

and you wonder aloud  
if your would-have-been in-laws  
donated the clothes after his death,  
perhaps even the books he'd read  
and the papers he'd scribbled on,

*I never saw any of it after the funeral*

and then your breath slowing down  
for a further explanation:

*It wasn't that I thought it was him,  
only the shirt. I need something more of his  
to touch, feel.*

## **That Special Place Beneath the Water**

I thought you needed to get away,  
and so to the lake I drove you,  
an hour beyond the city  
and away from graves of any kind.

It's one of those late-summer days,  
the kind where warmth  
bathes us in a calm we don't notice  
in July, perhaps because the beach  
is much too crowded then,  
there are too many gulls  
fighting for food,  
or it might just be we appreciate  
its transient nature more,  
knowing the air will be colder soon  
and it is human instinct to appreciate  
what you normally take for granted  
when faced with its inevitable loss.

And I've never been able to cook  
so the sandwiches I made  
will have to do,  
the kind that don't go bad too soon,  
with honey that attracts the bugs, I know,

but beyond that, we'll throw a ball  
and read from books, walk the shore  
and toss some stones,

and I'll suggest a cooling swim  
in waves that wash the stress from minds,  
and you'll surprise me with a *yes*  
and splash about as a child might,  
as you did when you were a girl,

and you'll submerge your head  
and hold your breath  
for at least a half-a-minute,  
endeavouring to touch that part of yourself  
where air cannot reach  
nor light tell the world  
what you've hid.

## Herbs

With Autumn's approach,  
all that is left  
of my garden  
are the herbs,

the parsley,  
oregano,  
dill & peppermint leaves,  
the ones I've saved  
for *you*,

their perennial popping up  
less of a beautiful thing  
each year,  
becoming bitter bit-by-bit  
with every passing, spreading  
of season.

## **We Walked in Autumn**

I saw yellow in the changing leaves  
like the sun of a summer sky.  
You saw the fleeing of the green.  
I noted the red of the maple,  
reminiscent of apples, crisp –  
you saw the colour of a giant star  
before its heave and supernova.

In the drying leaves of brown,  
you saw death,  
as most people do, even those  
not in grief. I said though these lack  
a vivid colour, they serve  
their varied purpose:  
perhaps to mirror wood,  
the blandly-tinted squirrels,  
the food they tend to gather,

offer blending for the birds  
who stay a little while longer  
than the jays, cardinals,  
seeing nothing from which to flee.



## The Gleaning

Not the flowers  
at their peak,  
petals ripe  
with colour,  
standing taut  
and proud and tall,  
but the withered,  
the stooped-over,  
the faded and the frayed,  
the ones about-to-die,  
from these  
I take and give you,  
plucked  
and propped by hand,  
so that *love* be said  
by the no-longer-lovely,  
by the beautiful  
nevermore.

### Haiku III

Stems bowed in a vase  
Curtains keeping out the sun  
Five fallen petals

## The Confession

The cemetery  
wasn't my choice  
for confession,  
of my love for you,  
that you're more beautiful  
than the birds,  
that I wish for something more  
than simply "friends,"

but there's no place else  
we go, of late,

the times we shared the park,  
the fountain,  
a movie here and there  
(in the hope you'd somehow laugh),  
now past  
like the dead we spend our days with;

and why I join you  
still  
makes little sense,

yet we're here once more,  
in October's coloured bridge  
of warmth-to-cold,  
to stand in the almost-silence,

my "I love you" whisked  
by a stronger-than-normal  
gale,  
tearing the last of the foliage  
from trees,

so they too will stand stripped  
of what they had  
and might-have-held,

had air not grown  
so very cold,

had light found the will  
to keep the lengthening darkness  
away.

## The Sound of Something Blooming

When I called you,  
yes, I'd hoped for more,  
not just of things  
pertaining to futilities  
of the heart,  
but of the *simple* words  
that conversation  
ought to bring,  
like if you were feeling better,  
and did you have a good night's rest,

and you spoke but ever-so-briefly,  
of the pills you needed to take,  
my failing to guess the quantity  
of which you hinted,  
and of how you'd wash them down,  
your *goodbye* far more  
than cordiality,  
my regret about to blossom  
like a field of lilies in white.

## Haiku IV

Casket made of oak  
Birds gather at the steeple  
Sounds of prayers and wings

## The World Revolved and We Felt It Not

It's exactly a *year*  
since your passing,  
on the morn' of All Saints' Day,  
and the remnants of Hallows' Eve  
litter porches, decorate  
the occasional window  
where Christmas lights  
will tell another tale,  
one about birth, not death,

but aside from that,  
I barely notice  
the foreboding flakes  
in the rapidly cooling air,  
the sun but a blip in the clouds,  
the grey of the day  
overshadowing all,  
even her hand  
stretching vainly for mine –

as I stand by the grave  
of the engaged,  
leaving the last of the roses  
that I grew in my garden  
this long, hot Summer for you.

And of her, the one I met  
in the Spring,

the one who accompanies  
my comings and goings  
from this godless, pitiful place,

I think she whispers something,  
about feeling, how she feels,  
and I'm unable to hear it,  
to bear it, any of it,  
my half-there reply,

*not now, I'm sorry,  
not yet.*



the author



Andreas Gripp is the author of  
13 books of poetry and 12 chapbooks.

He lives in London, Ontario.

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